

A tree moves in Punta Gorda

Ponytail 'palm' gets new digs at Botanical Gardens

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PUNTA GORDA — It's a good thing the botanist was there.

Without Kathryn Preston, the project might have been just another Punta Gorda palm tree road trip.

It was, in fact, much more than that. What was being moved Thursday from a home in Punta Gorda Isles to the Peace River Botanical & Sculpture Gardens was, first and foremost, not a palm tree.

It was a ponytail tree, *Beaucarnea recurvata*, if you prefer, and a fine, old specimen at that. Liz and Bill Chudoba were donating it.

"It's not actually a palm," Preston said. "You see it sometimes in other landscapes, but not as big and not as beautiful. It's such a beautiful specimen."

Liz has donated lots of plants and things to the Gardens, scheduled to open in fall 2017.

"I feel very strongly about the Gardens," she said. Her donations are among the nearly 2,000 plantings at the Gardens this summer.

"She's donated a lot of exciting ones," Preston said.



The ponytail tree stands next to the PGI home of Liz and Bill Chudoba before taking its road trip to the Peace Rivers Botanical & Sculpture Gardens.

The Gardens so far has received about 50 donations — from flowering trees to primitive cycads, Preston said.

"It's almost the people's garden because of all the community donations," she said.

The ponytail tree is the "most significant donation we've got," said Marilyn Smith-Mooney,

executive director of the Gardens' board. Preston also is a member of the board, while Liz is a volunteer.

In a matter of two hours, the crew of Beautiful Boundaries' Danny Jones and Keesling Construction's Scott Graber, the Sandy Koufax of crane operators, picked up the



SUN PHOTOS BY RUSTY PRAY

Touchdown. Or, rather, tree up. Danny Jones of Beautiful Boundaries, right, and a helper who declined to be identified raise their arms to signal the crane operator the tree was on the rise.

18-foot, 5,000-pound tree, trailored it, and transported it about 11 miles to Cleveland.

The crane, the trailer, the truck that pulled it and the labor were donated.

As the old ponytail guy, estimated to be at least 40 years old, was being readied for the crane to lift it gently from the ground, Smith-Mooney worried, "This is no easy task."

No, but it was done with deftness, skill and obvious caring. About 50 minutes into the project, the tree, no worse for the wear, was being strapped to the trailer. About 30 minutes later, it was being pulled into the Gardens.

"It's certainly going to add a unique plant to the Gardens," Roger Tetrault said as he watched. "It's good to get trees this size. This is wonderful to

get something like this. It really is helpful."

Tetrault has a vision for the tree. Its new spot is adjacent to the installation called the Steel Palm. One day in the new future, it will be called the iconic Steel Palm. Tetrault sees weddings being held in its shadow.

The ponytail tree has joined that landscape, standing as a focal point of the future.



The tree is laid gently on a trailer to be hauled to its new home in the Botanical Gardens.



"It has shallow roots," says botanist Kathryn Preston. Here, her conjecture is proven correct.



The tree is hauled into the Gardens.



As workers guide it in, the ponytail tree settles into its new home.



From left, botanist Kathryn Preston, Gardens founder Roger Tetrault, donator Liz Chudoba and Gardens executive director Marilyn Smith-Mooney.



Danny Jones keeps a grip on the guide rope as crane operator Scott Graber walks the tree down the driveway.